

A Mennonite Looks at Ecumenicity

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From the perspective of theology the true Church has always been and is truly ecumenical or worldwide. However, such ecumenicity is one of spirit rather than of structure or organization. It is evident that no one group has captured the Kingdom. The multiplicity of religious expression in denominationalism can add to, rather than detract from, the larger understanding of the Christian faith. But there is also the danger of any denomination making an idol out of its own system. We should confess that while Christ is all that our systems of doctrine say about Him, He is more than such systems can express. With this awareness, each group needs to be in conversation with the larger Christian Church so that each respective group may be enriched in the total proclamation of the Gospel.

The Mennonite Church has its roots in the Reformation, having been born in Zurich, Switzerland, in January, 1525. The Swiss Brethren or Anabaptists were the group insisting on experiential Christianity in the Reformation. This group held as a major emphasis the necessity of personal conversion and the resultant expressions of the new creature. They insisted on the importance of the individual and the freedom of both the individual believer and the Christian congregation. This voluntarism of faith was matched with an ardent evangelistic proclamation in which persons were solicited to enter into an existential involvement with the living Christ. Those who confessed Him as Lord shared together in a brotherhood of believers which sought to express "the Church visible." It is this deep conviction which underlies the character of the disciplined church and the call to holiness of life as expressed in the Anabap-

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tist-Mennonite tradition. The belief that the grace of God works to transform one's life and make him a new creature becomes a central affirmation of discipleship or daily Christian living.

In the sixteenth century the Anabaptists were one of the most ecumenical of the church groups. They would meet anyone anywhere at any time on the basis of the Scripture. This meant genuine Christian conversation in which the authority of the Word was confessed as the one ground for discussion. There were at least five premises in their theological perspective which made this conversation meaningful. First, they regarded membership in the Kingdom of Heaven as a relationship transcending relationship to any earthly culture or nationalism; second was their concept of the freedom of faith in voluntary associations with the Church, or the people of God; third, they held a deep conviction that the authority of Scripture is seen through the fullness of revelation in Christ, which consequently resulted in an elevation of the New Testament above the Old. Fourth, their position that any man who is a new creature in Christ is a brother in grace, implies that Christian conversation should supersede other lines of distinction. Fifth, they regarded the principle of redemptive love as motivating the Church to the ministry of reconciliation. This last premise is the positive aspect of the doctrine of nonresistance which refused to strike back at one's enemies.

In spite of its cooperative spirit, the Anabaptist movement was persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants. Someone has said the Anabaptists were too Protestant to be good Catholics and too Catholic to be good Protestants! They saw the formalism and degeneration of the Catholic Church on the one hand, and on the other the lack of ethical and moral perspective in much of the Protestant Church. But the one depth problem was their insistence that a state church was a "fallen church." The Anabaptists emphasized the freedom of the church and discipleship in the total life. Their witness called persons to experience an individual conversion and to commit themselves to lives of holiness. They believed that to rediscover the New Testament character of the Christian Church it was necessary to go back to a firsthand existential experience with the risen Christ.

Their emphasis offended the state churches of the day and the Anabaptists suffered martyrdom by the thousands. Consequently, while their premises permitted ecumenical dialogue with any group at any time, their emphasis cut them off from others as a threat to the program of the institutional church. As early as 1526, Michael Sattler differed with Martin Bucer at Strasbourg. Bucer said that since the end of the commandment is love, love should supersede all of their differences; Sattler answered that love does not make

obedience unnecessary. The basic premise of Sattler as an Anabaptist leader was fidelity to the will of Christ as Lord by members of His eternal Kingdom. Consequently, through their emphasis on personal conversion, the resultant impact of their ardent evangelism, and their emphasis on the primacy of membership in the heavenly Kingdom, their movement was characterized by separation from the other groups. But this separation was not an end in itself, for conversation with others was an attempt to introduce the primacy of the eternal Kingdom to total Christendom. In contrast to the state church practice of capital punishment for persons who rejected their faith, the Anabaptists insisted that the church use the ban or excommunication, but never the sword. This enabled them to regard offenders as persons who could be reclaimed.

The Mennonite Church, through the centuries, with its basic position of membership in the Kingdom of Heaven expressed in the call to holy living and to the way of peace, has found itself in a unique position in relation to other denominations. For example, the Mennonite Church, being deeply committed to an evangelical perspective and at the same time deeply concerned for the social implications of the Gospel, finds itself somewhere at the median in the spectrum of church life and is able to enter into conversation with persons to the right and to the left. In contemporary ecumenical dialogue the Mennonite Church is in a strategic position for conversation, and yet one which may endanger its own security and existence if it falls prey to the pressures which could tear it apart. In view of this position, it is important that the denomination clarify its own mission in the light of the twentieth century situation and the mandate of the risen Christ.

The author's conviction, resulting from the preceding presentation, is that there are areas in which the Mennonite Church can participate in contributing to the larger stream of Christianity from its own heritage and perspective, without sacrificing its character. First of all, ecumenicity can be regarded as a matter of spirit rather than of structure, with conversation on the world-wide outreach of the Church, at the same time avoiding an ecclesiastical bureaucracy. Second, there can be a sincere amount of cooperation in which the identity and particular contribution of the several groups is retained while at the same time the groups are able to avoid overlap and unsanctified competition. Third, there are areas of sharing in which more effective programs of reaching the unchurched can be inaugurated so that the nonchurched person discovers that Christians are actually introducing him to Christ rather than simply to a system of religion. Fourth, there is a continuing need for cooperation between churches in meeting the social needs of society. The Christian Church cannot operate in relation to the Lordship of Christ without

giving the cup of cold water or without going the second mile to help persons into the Kingdom of Christ. Fifth, there are areas in which the Christian Church should work together to enrich and correct the given culture in which the churches exist. For example, in our western society there are many examples of sub-Christian behavior which can only be corrected when the Christian Church dares to expose the unbelief of our society and resist the paganism which permeates so much of American life. This correction can come through creative efforts on the part of the Church, developing awareness and conviction of need in a far greater way than can ever be done by political forces simply using law. These are examples of areas in which the benefits of ecumenical involvement can be felt in our society.

These observations have been submitted as a perspective by one who has worked widely in the Mennonite brotherhood and also in cooperative evangelistic programs for the last ten years. Out of this experience the preceding observations have been confirmed. True ecumenical or world-wide involvement is not manmade; it exists as a work of the Holy Spirit wherever the Lordship of Jesus Christ is acknowledged. "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid which is Jesus Christ."